

30 AMERICANS

EDUCATORS' RESOURCES



Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Bird On Money*, 1981. Acrylic and oil on canvas, 66 x 90 inches. Rubell Family Collection, Miami.

30 Americans is organized by the **Rubell Family Collection**.

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Dear Educators,

30 Americans is a wide-ranging survey of work by many of the most important African American artists of the last three decades. Selected from the Rubell Family Collection, the exhibition brings together seminal figures such as Jean-Michel Basquiat and David Hammons with younger and emerging artists such as Kehinde Wiley and Shinique Smith. Often provocative and challenging, *30 Americans* focuses on issues of racial, sexual, and historical identity in contemporary culture. It explores how each artist reckons with the notion of black identity in America, navigating such concerns as the struggle for civil rights, popular culture, and media imagery. At the same time, it highlights artistic legacy and influence, tracing subject matter and formal strategies across generations.

Originally displayed at the Rubell Family Foundation in Miami, Florida, *30 Americans* has been reconceived for its presentation in Washington. At the Corcoran, the exhibition is organized around the idea of artistic community and legacy, highlighting relationships between artists across generations. Various galleries will center on a foundational figure, showing how that artist's ideas and formal innovations ripple through contemporary practice. For instance, Robert Colescott's investigations of the narratives of art and history in relation to African American culture echo through the grand portraits of Kehinde Wiley and the cut-paper silhouettes of Kara Walker. Jean-Michel Basquiat's graffiti-based paintings of the urban environment find current form in the work of Mark Bradford and Shinique Smith. David Hammons's wry investigations of language and meaning in a racial context provide a starting point for the conceptualism of Glenn Ligon and Lorna Simpson. Other galleries explore themes of self-presentation, masquerade, and media culture. *30 Americans* consists of paintings, sculptures, drawings, photographs, and videos, and includes spectacular works of art such as Leonardo Drew's massive cotton and wax sculpture *Untitled #25*, several of Nick Cave's exuberant *Soundsuits*, and a large-scale silhouette by Kara Walker.

Included in this resource packet are lesson plans, text, and images of 16 selected works from the exhibition. We hope these materials are useful to you in presenting the artists and themes in *30 Americans*. If you wish to schedule a free tour and workshop for your students, please contact Susannah Brown at swbrown@corcoran.org or 202-639-1739. Thank you for your interest in the Corcoran and its exhibitions.

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JOHN BANKSTON

(B. BENTON HARBOR, MI, 1963; LIVES AND WORKS IN SAN FRANCISCO, CA)

AT THE CROSSROADS 2006-07

OIL ON LINEN, 54 X 48 IN (137.1 X 122 CM)

ABOUT THE ARTIST

John Bankston earned a Bachelor of Science degree in biology from the University of Chicago in 1985. His formal art education began a few years later with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Skowhegan, Maine in 1989. He then received his Master of Fine Arts degree from the School of Art Institute of Chicago in 1990. Bankston's career as a professor has included teaching at the California College of Arts and Crafts in San Francisco, and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He has received several honors to date including the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Fellowship in 2001, the Joan Mitchell Foundation Award in 2002, and the Fleishhacker Award in 2004. Bankston's work has been exhibited nationwide as well as in Spain, Italy, and Germany. He has stated that he combines drawing, painting, figuration, and abstraction through the visual language of coloring books. He is interested in creating a sustained narrative with a limited number of fanciful characters whom he invents. Bankston has said

The idea of 'fantasy' is often thought of as the province of idle escapists. But I like to think of fantasy as a way of re-imagining our world. It is a means of stepping outside of one's known territory and breaking boundaries.

ABOUT THE ART

Bankston is interested in creating a sustained narrative centered on a limited number of characters. He thinks of his work as an ongoing visual novel that he calls *The Capture and Escape of Mr. M: Tales from the Rainbow Forest*. It exists in the forms of drawings, painting, and most recently sculpture, rather than in the printed word. Generally, the narrative is presented through small drawings or paintings with large works representing key moments in the storyline. In the first installment, Mr. M is captured by Mr. L and taken to the Rainbow Forest. With the help of various forest characters, Mr. M escapes and makes his way through this strange land. Mr. M stumbles upon a circus in the clearing of the forest. He also encounters a competition between bird men and strong men and many other intriguing people and events. Meanwhile, Mr. L, still in pursuit, enlists the help of a horn-headed trickster to recapture Mr. M. The rich narrative creates the opportunity for viewers to follow and identify with the protagonist and those he meets along the way, and the lack of text allows them to interpret the story on their own terms. Bankston explained by saying,

because the work suggests a narrative and because that narrative jumps, the viewer has to fill in the gaps and enter the character's shoes and think things they might not necessarily think or might even be uncomfortable thinking about. It's like stepping into the shoes of an 'other.'

The thick black lines used to delineate figures and their surroundings in Bankston's paintings recall the style of coloring books. Color does not always completely fill the spaces between the lines, and some areas are left completely unpainted. Some of the faces are without color in order to indicate that the process of providing specific "hues" for ethnic groups is ongoing. When seen side by side, the paintings read like a visual novel, distinct and independently conceived, like chapters, but also part of a conclusive whole. As Bankston reflected,

I actually like the idea of them being a unit that gets separated. It's like an album and a single from that album. All together it makes a work, but it can live on its own, too. Coloring books are not really linear; they jump from one image to the next. You can understand them as a story or you can see them as individual pages.

SUGGESTED DIALOGUE

- In what ways do you detect similarities between Bankston's painting and coloring books?
- What if Bankston had not "colored inside the lines?" How would that change the feeling of the work?
- Imagine filling in the uncolored spaces in the painting. What colors would you choose for certain areas and why?
- Bankston says his paintings are comparable to a visual novel. Look at the image and think about what might have come before and what might come next.



JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT

(B. BROOKLYN, NY, 1960; D. NEW YORK CITY, 1988)

BIRD ON MONEY 1981

ACRYLIC AND OIL ON CANVAS, 66 X 90 IN (167.6 X 228.6 CM)

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Jean-Michel Basquiat was born in Brooklyn to a Haitian father and Puerto Rican mother. His artistic talent surfaced at an early age, prompting his mother to enroll him as a junior member of the Brooklyn Museum at the age of six. He attended City-As-School High School in Brooklyn but left a year before graduating in 1978 to pursue other opportunities. Working under the name SAMO meaning “same old same old,” Basquiat began his career in the late 1970s as a graffiti artist, spray-painting the streets of lower Manhattan with messages about the commercialization of the art world. Initially supporting himself by selling painted postcards and T-shirts, he quickly rose to prominence in the 1980s and became one of the era’s most famous “art stars.” Exhibiting in Europe and Asia as well as throughout the United States, he became the youngest artist ever to be included in the **documenta** exhibition in Kassel, Germany in 1982. Even when he shifted his focus away from street art toward more traditional painting, these origins remained apparent. Basquiat’s work merged figuration, expressionism, and textual references in thick paint, aggressive brushstrokes, and vibrant color. Basquiat died in 1988 in New York.

ABOUT THE ART

Basquiat’s work is critically acclaimed for originality, emotional depth, and formal strength. His ingenuity resulted in painting on any material he could attain, including window sills and football helmets. Basquiat was able to buy his first studio in 1981, the

same year that he created *Bird on Money*. His process often involved pasting a sketch to the canvas, which lent his work a physicality recalling the urban surfaces of his artistic origins. Language was an increasingly important facet of Basquiat's work. Several artists of the time also injected words into their works, but he was extraordinarily proficient in blending text and picture into a dynamic whole; words, symbols, and imagery were combined to form a cohesive and original result. Music was very important to him, and the blending process he used was similar to the work of a deejay.

Bird on Money pays homage to his cherished icon, jazz musician Charlie "Bird" Parker. Several other leading men of music history appear in his work. When his art references such figures, their name in the title is the primary allusion to the association because Basquiat did not rely on physical likeness, instead opting to articulate in words the presence of the subject. Text mingles with repeated graphics and symbols, such as arrows and peace signs in the case of *Bird on Money*. The composition is spontaneous in feeling, likely a reference to the improvisational style Parker was known for in his performances. The words "**para morir**" memorialize Parker, who had died of pneumonia nearly three decades earlier at the age of thirty-four. The canvas is dominated by bright yellow and blue, along with white, red, black, green and tan. Among the abstract lines, geometric shapes, and occasional letters, the most recognizable and prominent feature is the profile of a bird with a crown. This ennobling motif was often used by Basquiat to adorn his heroes. While the body of the bird is distorted by other shapes and lines, the profile is clear and large, centralized at the top of the canvas. This bird, rather than any traditional likeness, signifies Parker's presence.

SUGGESTED DIALOGUE

- In what ways does *Bird on Money* reference Basquiat's experience with graffiti?
- Find the words and letters throughout the composition. What do they mean to you? What other recognizable signs and symbols do you see?
- Besides the image of a bird, what could have been other possibilities for representing the presence of Charlie Parker?
- Could you say that the changing lines and shapes create a rhythm?

VOCABULARY

- **documenta**: an [exhibition](#) of [modern](#) and [contemporary art](#) which takes place every five years in [Kassel, Germany](#). It was founded by artist, teacher, and curator [Arnold Bode](#) in 1955. Every documenta is limited to 100 days of exhibition, which is why it is often referred to as the "museum of 100 days." documenta XIII will begin on June 9, 2012.
- **para morir**: a Spanish phrase meaning "for death" or "to die"



IONA ROZEAL BROWN

(B. WASHINGTON, D.C., 1966; LIVES AND WORKS IN NEW YORK, NY)

SACRIFICE #2: IT HAS TO LAST (AFTER YOSHITOSHI'S "DROWSY: THE APPEARANCE OF A HARLOT OF THE MEIJI ERA"), 2007

ENAMEL, ACRYLIC, AND PAPER ON WOODEN PANEL, 52 X 38 IN. (132 X 96.5 CM)

ABOUT THE ARTIST

After earning a Bachelor of Science degree in kinesiological sciences from the University of Maryland College Park in 1991, Iona Rozeal Brown studied at Montgomery Community College in Maryland in 1995 and the Pratt Institute of New York in 1996. She received her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in painting from the San Francisco Art Institute in 1999 and a Master of Fine Arts degree in painting from Yale University School of Art in 2002. Brown has received several awards and honors, including the Blair Dickinson Award from Yale in 2002, grants from the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation and Joan Mitchell Foundation in 2007, and the Joyce Foundation Award in 2009. Brown's work, which has been exhibited nationwide, aims to articulate contemporary concerns regarding race, gender, and class. A great deal of her subject matter has been informed by her travels to Japan. Brown hopes to return to Asia for further inspiration and to visit China and Korea. She has received particular attention for her body of work that represents cultural hybrids. Brown is also a deejay and believes that her art and her music are similar because they are both

a process of self-sampling and remixing.

ABOUT THE ART

In her mixed-media paintings, brown revamps and revisits art history through her examination of racial stereotypes and the fluidity of cultural identity. brown's work takes equal influence from 19th-century Japanese erotica or **shunga**, early 20th-century American **vaudeville**, and contemporary hip-hop culture. A prime theme she addresses is the global influence of African American culture as fetish. She often features figures in her work that are based on Japanese youth known as *ganguro*, which literally translates as black face. *Ganguro* are individuals who darken their skin and fashion their hair with braided cornrows and extensions to resemble their hip-hop idols. After learning of this subculture while studying in San Francisco, brown traveled to Japan to better understand the youths themselves. She described that experience by saying,

Being African-American, I'm flattered that our music and style is so influential... but I have to say that I find the ganguro obsession with blackness pretty weird, and a little offensive. My paintings come out of trying to make sense of this appropriation.

Brown's work functions as a cultural sampling that creates hybrids of her various sources of inspiration. Paintings such as *Sacrifice #2: It has to last (after Yoshitoshi's "Drowsy: the appearance of a harlot of the Meiji era")* fits into the category which brown refers to as "Afro-Asiatic allegories". The cross-cultural fusions sometimes read like plays or novels and take cues from traditional Japanese **Bunkaru** and **Noh** theater techniques. *Sacrifice #2* is based on an 1888 woodblock print created by renowned artist **Tsukioka Yoshitoshi**. Yoshitoshi's *Drowsy: the appearance of a Harlot of the Meiji era* was in a print series entitled *Fuzoku sanjuisno* or *Thirty-Two Aspects of Women*. Brown's painting shows a female figure reclining against an abstract background. No furniture is clearly articulated, but her position would suggest that she lies on a couch or bed. The curling rope-like detail behind her could represent a bed post and frame, and the brightly patterned areas could be a pillow and blanket. The woman's face rests against her right hand, while the left hand is placed in front of her; the nails on both hands are painted in a very decorative style. The figure has long flowing black hair that cascades from an elaborate arrangement on top of her head. Also included are decorative design elements of 17th- and 18th-century Japanese woodblock prints that feature white-faced geishas, in which the cat is a frequent subject. Brown juxtaposes color and texture in this image, which displays stereotypes of both cultures with equal parts geisha and hip-hop vixen. In Brown's own words,

Part of the romantic idea is that we are all mirror images of each other. Beyond the ganguro phenomenon, there are many connections between these two cultures; on a good day, the relationship is reciprocal, the dark-faced ganguro may not be popular anymore, but the acquisition of hip-hop accoutrements, both visual and verbal, is vogue, fly, fresh...you get the picture.

SUGGESTED DIALOGUE

- Can you find African American hip-hop elements in this image? What about Japanese influences?
- Do the geisha and hip-hop vixen identities blend well, or do certain elements dominate?
- How does this piece address brown's concerns regarding different aspects of identity such as race, gender, and class?
- Brown is a deejay and feels her art and music are similar because they both require sampling and remixing. In what ways does *Sacrifice #2* blend like a piece of music? Through color? Texture? Line?
- If you were to blend two different cultures in one image, what cultures would you choose? What elements would influence you to choose certain groups?

VOCABULARY

Appropriation: borrow elements of an existing work- ideas, symbols, imagery—in the creation of a new work by changing its context

Bunkaru: a form of traditional Japanese theater that involves the use of half life-sized puppets, a chanted narrative, and music

Ganguro: Japanese youth who emulate African American hip hop cultural icons by altering their appearance

Noh: a form of classical Japanese drama where storyteller performers use their movements and appearance to evoke the essence of their tale

Shunga: Japanese erotic art

Vaudeville: late 19th and early 20th century variety theater technique

Tsukioka Yoshitoshi: renowned Japanese woodblock print artist (1839-1892)

NICK CAVE

(B. JEFFERSON CITY, MO, 1959; LIVES AND WORKS IN CHICAGO, IL)



UNTITLED 2006

FABRIC, SEQUINS, FIBERGLASS, AND METAL, 100 X 26 X 13 IN. (254 X 66 X 33 CM)



UNTITLED 2008

FABRIC, SEQUINS, FIBERGLASS AND METAL, 100 X 25 X 14 IN. (254 X 63.5 X 35.6 CM)



SOUNDSUIT 2008

FABRIC, FIBERGLASS AND METAL, 102 X 36 X 28 IN. (259 X 91.5 X 71 CM)



SOUNDSUIT 2008

HUMAN HAIR, FIBERGLASS AND METAL, 98 X 27 X 14 IN. (248.9 X 68.6 X 35.6 CM)

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Nick Cave's creativity was encouraged from an early age by his mother, who supported the creativity expressed in the hand-made birthday cards and gifts he made as a child. His modest upbringing is one source for his continuing interest in found objects and assemblage. Describing his early creative approach to his clothing, Cave has said,

"When you're raised by a single mother with six brothers and lots of hand-me-downs, you have to figure out how to make those clothes your own. That's how I started off, using things around the house."

Cave graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Kansas City Art Institute in 1982 and continued on to earn a Master of Fine Arts degree from the Cranbrook Academy of Art 1989. During that time he learned to sew, a skill that remains crucial in his work. Cave also studied dance through Alvin Ailey in Kansas City and New York. Cave currently serves as the director of the graduate fashion program at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Concerning his teaching, he once said,

I hope to provide my students with the knowledge that their art making holds the possibility for acting as a vehicle for change on a larger, global scale.

He is the two-time winner of the Creative Capital grant in 2002 and 2004 and a recipient of the Joyce Foundation Award in 2006 and the Joan Mitchell Foundation Award in 2008. Cave's primary concern is to ensure that his art reaches a broad community, or as he puts it in his personal mission statement: "I MATTER."

ABOUT THE ART

Cave is best known for his "soundsuits," which are composed of a variety of materials including metal, plastic, fabric, toys, hair, and found objects. The soundsuits are presented publicly through live performance, video, photography, and as static sculptures.

Cave created his first soundsuit in response to the Rodney King incident in 1991.

It was a very hard year for me because of everything that came out of the Rodney King beating. I started thinking about myself more and more as a black man — as someone who was discarded, devalued, viewed as less than.

One day, sitting on a bench in Grant Park in Chicago, he saw twigs on the ground in a new light: they too seemed forsaken. He gathered the twigs, cut them into three-inch pieces, which he then drilled in order to wire them to a garment. As soon as the twig sculpture was finished, he realized that he could wear it as a second skin:

I put it on and jumped around and was just amazed. It made this fabulous rustling sound. And because it was so heavy, I had to stand very erect, and that alone brought the idea of dance back into my head.

Animated through movement and sound, soundsuits inspire audiences to look inwardly and examine personal and cultural identity. The suits are crafted from repurposed materials with a wide range of techniques that include embroidery, crochet, knitting, and

rug-hooking. Their design is never preconceived, and Cave allows it develop as he works with the materials. Soundsuits draw from sources such as African ceremonial costumes, Tibetan textiles, and creatures from popular culture. Many recall the **African positing** of spiritual power in objects. When the suits are worn or performed, the body essentially becomes the carrier of the artwork, while the individual wearing the suit's identity is concealed. Cave described his personal experience wearing the suits by saying,

Once I put it on, I have to settle with myself. I don't move for a while. I've got to reach the point where I surrender my identity and it's no longer present. If you don't do that, you find that it's too overwhelming...when I was inside a suit, you couldn't tell if I was a woman or man; if I was black, red, green or orange; from Haiti or South Africa. I was no longer Nick. I was a shaman of sorts.

SUGGESTED DIALOGUE

- What found objects do you see in the soundsuits? What material would you use to create one?
- A Can you imagine what it would be like to wear a soundsuit? Do you think it would be difficult to stand up straight?
- How might the experience of the soundsuits change from wearing them, versus seeing them stationary, versus seeing them used in a performance?
- Consider the ways in which Nick Cave's dance background might influence the idea, construction, and completion of the soundsuits.

VOCABULARY

African Positing: give value or proof to the African diaspora

Alvin Ailey: a modern dance company that performs worldwide; based in New York City, it was founded in 1958 by dancer and choreographer Alvin Ailey

Assemblage: a collection or gathering of things or people

Found Objects: the use of an object which has not been designed as artistic material, but which already exists for another purpose.



ROBERT COLESCOTT

(B. OAKLAND, CA, 1925; D. TUCSON, AZ, 2009)

PYGMALION, 1987

ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 90 X 114 IN (228.6 X 289.6 CM)

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Robert Colescott grew up drawing and painting. After serving four years in the United States Army in France and Germany during World War II, he earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in 1949 and a Master of Fine Arts degree in 1952 from the University of California, Berkeley. While studying with the French artist **Fernand Léger** from 1949 through 1950, Colescott explored several different styles of painting. According to Colescott, it was Léger's influence that encouraged him to employ a monumental scale and forgo abstraction in favor of strong drawing, black line, and pure color applied to figurative work. He spent the mid-1960s in Cairo, Egypt, where he developed his ideas about creating narrative scenes that differed from the pictorial traditions of Western art. It was also at this time that race became ingrained in Colescott's subject matter. He stated,

I had put black people in my paintings, the same way I'd put in a guitar or a bottle, but they had no real significance until I went to Egypt.

From 1970 to 1985, Colescott taught painting at Cal State Stanislaus, UC Berkeley, and the San Francisco Art Institute. He was appointed professor of art at the University of Arizona, Tucson in 1983. In 1997, Colescott became the first African American artist to represent the United States in the **Venice Biennale**. Frequently **appropriating** icons of Western painting by artists including **Vincent van Gogh** and **Pablo Picasso**, Colescott's irreverent take on tradition in the art world has been foundational to the work of generations of artists who came after him.

ABOUT THE ART

Colescott's distinctive style of figurative expressionism can be both humorous and subversive. Often referring to specific stories from history and from art, Colescott has utilized the name and elements of the traditional story of **Pygmalion** and revitalized it with a multiracial interpretation of the characters. A montage of characters and landscapes merge into an image of vibrant color and activity that is set in an enigmatic space. The scene includes references to iconic works from art history such as the *Venus de Milo* on the viewer's left and the *Mona Lisa* on the viewer's right, both of which now appear black. Colescott once reflected on references such as these by saying,

I was one of the first to use appropriation in a way that might be called postmodern. But most artists who appropriate do it as some sort of homage to an artist they admire. Mine was no homage. I wanted to dominate that other artist.

In the center of the painting, a white-bearded Caucasian man caresses the face of a black woman whose image in different dress and settings is repeated throughout the composition. The unpredictable and sometimes unsettling atmosphere of Colescott's paintings challenges racial and gender stereotypes and provokes viewers to question received truths. His concern for the appearance of his paintings is stated as follows,

I'm an old-fashioned painter. I like to make paintings that look good. If they have that quality, one day when the subject matter is completely worn out, people will stop responding in shock.... I want these paintings to be valued because of the way they look as paintings.

SUGGESTED DIALOGUE

- In Colescott's composition, several activities occur simultaneously. What do you think is happening in each area of the painting?
- Do you think this accurately portrays the story of Pygmalion? Why or why not?
- How do you describe Colescott's painting style? How do you think he plans the arrangement of his figures?

VOCABULARY

Fernand Léger (1881–1955): Léger was a French painter, sculptor, and filmmaker. In his early works, he created a personal form of Cubism, which he gradually modified into a more figurative, populist style.

Appropriation: In the visual arts, to appropriate means to adopt, borrow, recycle or sample aspects (or the entire form) of visual culture in the creation of a new work.

Venice Biennale: A major contemporary art exhibition that takes place once every two years (in odd years) in Venice, Italy. The Biennale is based at a park, the Giardini, which houses 30 permanent national pavilions.

Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890): A Dutch Post-Impressionist painter whose work had a far-reaching influence on 20th century art through its vivid colors and emotional impact.

Pablo Picasso (1881–1973): A Spanish artist who lived and worked most of his adult life in France. He is best known for co-founding the Cubist movement and for the wide variety of styles he explored in his work.

Pygmalion: In ancient mythology, a sculptor who fell in love with one of his own creations. After the creator presented offerings to Venus, the statue turned into a real human female.

NOAH DAVIS

(B. SEATTLE, WA, 1983; LIVES AND WORKS IN LOS ANGELES, CA)



BASIC TRAINING 1, 2008

OIL AND ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 10 X 10 IN (25.4 X 25.4 COM)



BASIC TRAINING 2, 2008

OIL AND ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 10 X 10 IN (25.4 X 25.4 COM)



BASIC TRAINING 3, 2008

OIL AND ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 10 X 10 IN (25.4 X 25.4 COM)



BASIC TRAINING 4, 2008

OIL AND ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 10 X 10 IN (25.4 X 25.4 COM)

ABOUT THE ARTIST

From 2001 to 2004 Noah Davis studied at the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art in New York City. Affiliated for a time with graffiti artists in New York, he then determined that this style was not the manner in which he could best express his artistic visions. Davis moved across the country to explore new opportunities in Los Angeles. While working in a bookstore, he spent a great deal of time reading art history books, which re-ignited his interest in painting. Davis came to the conclusion that the only occupation which could hold his interest was creating art; he described his other work experiences in Los Angeles by saying,

I got fired from all those jobs. I think sometimes I've not really been connected to everything I've been around.

Davis most recently exhibited his work in Culver City, California and Naples, Italy. He is the youngest artist participating in the *30 Americans* exhibition.

Davis's work explores a variety of narratives that address topics from poverty to war. These scenes often portray the sadness and banality that can be a part of everyday life. Davis's images come from photography, art history, and his own autobiographical experiences. He cites German painters, in particular the Leipzig School, as a source of influence. Davis employs techniques such as blurring, distortion, and varying levels of detail to create a nostalgic, dreamlike atmosphere. In Davis's own words,

Painting does something to your soul that nothing else can. It's visceral and immediate.

ABOUT THE ART

In his paintings, Davis often depicts African Americans in conventional scenarios that are unrelated to civil rights or social problems that occur in the United States. The *Basic Training* series explores the solitude and loneliness that can accompany military life. Davis stated that the series was inspired by his aunt's basic training experience in Virginia. Building upon a group of Polaroid photographs recording her experience, the artist translated the subject matter into paintings. Davis created his own "painter's basic training" in the way in which he created the works. He used only three colors: burnt umber, titanium white, and green. The exception to this color restriction is in *Basic Training 3*, where he added some pink. He limited himself to working for 30 minutes with each color on each painting, moving from canvas to canvas. All the figures in the series are female except the one in *Basic Training 3*. There is only one person in each picture, enforcing the artist's intended mood of isolation both physically as well as emotionally. The paintings' backgrounds do not allude to specific locations, although those in *Basic Training 1* and *Basic Training 3* seem to specify outdoor settings. In *Basic Training 1* the figure is dressed in military fatigues, while the one seated on top of the tank in *Basic Training 3* appears to be wearing civilian clothes. The artist stated that he was impressed and humbled by his aunt's bravery in choosing a career in the military while he pursued his calling as an artist.

SUGGESTED DIALOGUE

- In what ways has Davis conveyed the sense of isolation in his paintings?
- Does Davis's choice of a limited color palette affect the mood of the narrative shown in the paintings? If so, how?
- Do you feel that the artist's stated goal of showing his aunt's courage was accomplished? Why or why not?
- Does knowing that Davis is representing a family member's experience influence your interpretation of the work?

**LEONARDO DREW**

(B. TALLAHASSEE, FL, 1961; LIVES AND WORKS IN SAN ANTONIO, TX AND BROOKLYN, NY)

***UNTITLED #25* 1992**

COTTON AND WAX, 102 X 158 X 33 IN (259 X 401.3 X 83.8 CM)

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Named after the Renaissance artist and inventor Leonardo da Vinci, Leonardo Drew was born in Tallahassee, FL. At age six, his family moved to a housing project in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Drew loved to draw and became a prolific artist at very young age. In his teen years, Drew often displayed his drawings and paintings in local banks and community centers. His first solo show, held at the State National Bank in Bridgeport, exhibited his paintings of swans and clouds. After graduating from high school, Drew moved to New York City and enrolled in the Parsons School of Design. The following year, he transferred to the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, where he earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in painting in 1985. After graduation, Drew abandoned two-dimensional work in favor of large-scale sculptural forms made of cut paper. He described this change by explaining that “the brush and the pencil were crutches that prevented me from finding what I was looking for. It seems a paradox, but sometimes crutches can indeed prevent a man from learning how to walk.” Drew currently lives and works in both New York and San Antonio and exhibits nationwide and internationally.

ABOUT THE ART

Drew’s work often addresses the issues of “Blackness” in complex and indirect ways. Through intensive labor, he creates enormous works of art from humble materials such as the cotton used to make *Untitled #25*. His selection of materials highlights the parallels between the struggle of blacks in the rural South and their experiences in the industrial North. The use of cotton in *Untitled #25* is a sobering reminder that this

agricultural industry in the 19th century was dependent on slave labor. The sheer size of Drew's work, which measures over 13 feet long and 8 feet tall, also impacts the audience's viewing experience. He often employs this monumental scale and structure for his work. *Untitled #25* resembles a wall with bricks of mostly uniform dimensions. It has nine rows of cotton blocks arranged in seven columns. The large grid-like structure, composed of raw cotton blocks held together with wax, possesses an underlying sense of stability. Drew did not trim the strands of cotton, which threaten to escape the installation. The result is a process-oriented work with an animated texture and a vivid materiality.

To leave interpretation to the audience, Drew chose to number rather than name his art. He explained this decision by declaring,

"I can't sit and tell you exactly what your experience is going to be... that's your own personal journey, and I'm going to give you 100 percent of that by giving you no titles."

Drew insists that the works should act as mirrors that allow the viewer to participate and project their understanding. He stated,

"There's a historical experience, and there's a human experience."

Both are integral to the meaning and experience of the works and are not intended to battle against one another but rather provide a base of understanding.

SUGGESTED DIALOGUE

- How would your interpretation of the work change if the vertical lines formed by the seven stack of cotton were perfectly straight? How would the perception change if the cotton were dyed rather than left its natural color?
- Why do you think the artist constructs his work with numerous rectangular sections rather than making it one solid wall?
- What are other associations people might make with cotton in addition to 19th-century slavery practices?

**DAVID HAMMONS**

(B. SPRINGFIELD, IL, 1943; LIVES AND WORKS IN NEW YORK CITY)

***ESQUIRE (OR JOHN HENRY)* 1990**

STEEL, ROCK, HUMAN HAIR, AND TIN, 45 X 9 X 5 IN (114.3 X 22 X 13 CM)

ABOUT THE ARTIST

David Hammons was the youngest of ten children born to a single mother in Springfield, IL. After moving to Los Angeles, Hammons began studying at the Chouinard Art Institute, now Cal Arts, in 1966 and continued his education at the Otis Art Institute in 1968. It was during this time that Hammons began his series of *Body Prints*, translucent images of actual bodies imprinted on paper with grease. These satirical and political works are often seen to reflect the influence of the **Beat Generation's** poetry and underground films as well as events during the Civil Rights era.

In 1974, Hammons settled in New York City and began making sculptures constructed from cheap and discarded found objects. Hammons's rejection of traditional art mediums was seen as a reaction against what he considered to be "clean" art. Art movements such as **Dada** and **Arte Povera** served as precedents for his provocative juxtapositions of ordinary, often found materials. Hammons's conceptually based work is centered on social and political issues relevant to the black urban experience. Much of

his work is staged outside of the gallery or museum so as to make a direct intervention into everyday life.

"That's why I like doing stuff better on the street," he has said. "because the art becomes just one of the objects that's in the path of your everyday existence. It's what you move through, and it doesn't have any seniority over anything else."

These objects allude not only to issues of racial classification, bondage, resistance, and other social realities, but also to the ritualistic power of the objects themselves.

Hammons's investigations of the ways that language, substance, and race are intertwined have been foundational for generations of artists who followed him.

ABOUT THE ART

Hammons often addresses racial identity through American history, and in *Esquire*, his choice of subject matter is folk hero John Henry, who was born a slave in the 1840s and freed after the Civil War. Legend has it that, as a steel driver for the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad, Henry successfully raced a steam-powered drill with his two twenty-pound hammers. However, just as he won, he died from a burst blood vessel in his brain.

The portrait head of John Henry is made from a large ovoid rock with a lid from a can of shoe polish acting as the neck. The pedestal or body is made from a rusty railroad tie. While Hammons identifies this character by naming it, the actual face is left devoid of features. A collection of hair from African American barber shops crowns the head. After adhering the hair to the rock with human sweat, Hammons took it to a barber shop for a haircut, perhaps an illustration of the artist's interest in hair as a purveyor of character and identity. Naming the work *Esquire*, a British slang term denoting elite Anglo-Saxon status, lends it a sense of obsolete nobility and plays upon social conventions and historical context by contrasting white and black identities. *Esquire* is a representation of not only the folk hero but also the broader stereotype and identity of African Americans at the end of the nineteenth century. Artist Robert Colescott inspired Hammons to incorporate humor into his otherwise serious work, which is born from a moral obligation to document what he experiences socially.

SUGGESTED DIALOGUE

- Why do you think that Hammons chose these materials to create a portrait of John Henry? Is his selection appropriate for an American folk hero? Why or why not?
- Can you think of any modern American folk heroes? If you were to make a portrait of one, what materials would you use?
- Why do you think Hammons used these materials? How would the meaning of this portrait change if Hammons has chosen to use more traditional sculpture material such as marble or bronze?

VOCABULARY

- **Dada:** An art and literary movement begun in 1916 in response to the nationalist and materialistic values that were seen to have been the cause of World War I. the movement was begun in Zurich but had independent groups in Berlin, Paris, and New York. Rather than being characterized by a particular style of work, it is distinguished by the common rejection of conventional thought in art in order to stimulate society into a new sense of self-awareness.
- **Arte Povera:** This term was created by the Genoese critic Germano Celant for a group of Italian artists who created sculptures from everyday materials during the late 1960s. The work is characterized by using unconnected items in order to create surprising juxtapositions and unexpected physical interactions between the work and the viewer.
- **Conceptual Art** (idea art; information art): The term applied to work from the mid-1960s that either markedly de-emphasized or entirely eliminated a perceptual encounter with unique objects in favor of an engagement with ideas.
- **Beat Generation:** A group of American post-World War II writers who came to prominence in the 1950s, as well as the cultural phenomena that they both documented and inspired. Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* (1956), William S. Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* (1959) and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) are among the best known examples of Beat literature.



BARKLEY L. HENDRICKS

(B. PHILADELPHIA, PA, 1945; LIVES AND WORKS IN NEW LONDON, CT)

NOIR / 1978

OIL AND ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 72 X 48 IN (182.9 X 121.9 CM)

ABOUT THE ARTIST

The wealth of artistic resources available in Philadelphia fostered Barkley Hendricks's love of museums at an early age. However, he was constantly curious as to why there were no works by African American artists exhibited in the institutions that he frequented. Hendricks's formal artistic education began when he attended the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, where he received a certificate in 1967. He continued on to earn his Bachelor of Fine Arts and Master of Fine Arts degrees from Yale University. During that time his interest in photography, which remains important in his work today, was cultivated by one of his professors, the renowned photographer Walker Evans. Hendricks's first solo exhibition was held at the Philadelphia Art Alliance in 1968. He has served as a Professor at Connecticut College since 1972 and teaches representational painting and drawing, watercolor, and photography, among other subjects. Hendricks has been honored with several awards, including the Joan Mitchell Foundation Award in 2008 and, most recently, the Connecticut Governor's Award for Excellence in 2010.

For over four decades, Hendricks has incorporated his interests in jazz, photography, basketball, and travel into his work. Depicting subjects from the African American urban scene of the 1970s to the landscapes of Jamaica, his unique style of realism and mastery of color have appealed to younger artists such as Kehinde Wiley, Jeff Sonhouse, and Rashid Johnson.

ABOUT THE ART

In his work, Hendricks utilizes an assortment of techniques and media to focus on themes of identity, fashion, and style. Hendricks once stated,

Having a variety of media in my creative arsenal allows me various formats to explore and address the struggles and joys of being an artist. Although no pencil, paint, film, etc. will adequately describe certain feelings and desires, the variety makes it more compelling, thus more comprehensive and encompassing.

He prefers to paint from life when he can, but photography has always played an integral role in his creative process. Hendricks has gained notice for his life-sized portraits of urban people that capture the individuality and personality of the model and time period. The focus on portraiture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Pennsylvania increased his skill. Although Hendricks had an early interest in nature and landscapes, his practice was almost exclusively figure-based for nearly twenty years. He shifted back to the subject of nature in the 1990s and continues to work on life-sized portraits and Jamaican landscapes today.

Canvases like *Noir I* document the flourishing urban cultural scene of the 1960s and 1970s. The flat, monochromatic backgrounds, a medium yellow in the case of *Noir I*, focus the viewer's attention on the figures in the paintings. *Noir I* depicts a man in a three-piece suit standing in a posture of confident nonchalance. His clothing embodies a 1970s sense of cool. Hendricks once stated,

Every time you step outside your door you're on a fashion runway. The streets are a runway.

Style is a major factor in the artist's attraction to potential subjects. Sometimes Hendricks is acquainted with his subjects, but often he is not. When he passes someone in the street he finds compelling, he might capture his or her image in a photograph for possible inclusion in a future work of art. For example, a photograph he took of a man who was wearing a striking ensemble of all white was later the basis for a painting called *Dr. Cool*. Hendricks stays mostly true to the subject's original clothing, but modifies minor details when necessary. Over the years, Hendricks has compiled books of the photographic images he has taken over the years.

SUGGESTED DIALOGUE

- Looking at this portrait, how would you interpret the personality of the model? Have you seen or met anyone like this man?
- If this image represents a 1970s idea of "cool," what are the characteristics of that quality?
- If you were to create a portrait of an individual who represents the 2011 idea of "cool," who would you depict? What type of clothing would this person wear?
- Imagine you were going to replace the yellow background with a one that depicted a place. In what type of environment do you think this man might be found?



RASHID JOHNSON

(B. CHICAGO, IL, 1977, LIVES AND WORKS IN NEW YORK, NY)

I'M STILL IN LOVE WITH YOU, 2008

BLACK SOAP AND MICROCRYSTALLINE WAX ON BOARD WITH SPRAY ENAMEL, SHEA BUTTER, PLANTS, ALBUM, BRASS AND ROCKS 84 X 84 X 6 IN (213.36 X 213.36 X 15.24 CM)

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Rashid Johnson earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from Columbia College in 2000, and then a Master of Fine Arts degree at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Johnson's work received prominent notice in 2001 as part of *Freestyle* at the Studio Museum in Harlem. This exhibition, organized by Thelma Golden, is often considered to be the founding of the **post-black art movement**. A year later, he had his first solo exhibition, at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. Johnson is the two-time winner of the Presidential Purchase Award for Photography from Columbia College in 1997 and 1998 and is also a recipient of the 1998 Albert P. Weisman grant. A photographer and sculptor, Johnson often works with everyday materials such as shea butter and found objects such as VHS tapes. His work raises questions of personal, racial, and cultural identity while referencing African American and art history, cosmology, and mysticism. Johnson has exhibited nationwide and internationally over the course of his career, including at the **Venice Biennale**.

ABOUT THE ART

Instead of reimagining the black people's struggles, which were poignantly and powerfully represented by his predecessors, Johnson prefers to emphasize their strengths. He elaborated by stating,

There's a generation of black artists before me who made work specifically about the black experiences. But I think for my generation, having grown up in the age of hip-hop and Black Entertainment Television, there's less of a need to define the black experience so aggressively to a white audience. I think it gives us a different type of opportunity to have a more complex conversation around race and identity. It's not a weapon for me, it's more of an interest.

Johnson explores the ambiguities and attractions of black culture and the way it has been popularized, often taking a humorous approach to stereotypes. Through his art, he comments on the contradictions attached to the exploitation and glamorization of African American cultural stereotypes. He is interested in many aspects of African American history and culture. One of his particular interests is secret societies, both real and fictional. For example, see *The New Negro Escapist Social and Athletic Club (Thurgood)*, 2008, also in the *30 Americans* exhibition. In works such as *I Who Have Nothing*, Johnson adopts a variety of materials and objects and employs them as part of his artistic vocabulary. His sculptures incorporate materials such as soap and shea butter, skin care products that have a history in the construction of African-American identity. The books and records allude to personal interests that are shaped by popular culture. As Johnson has said,

Every material I use has a utilitarian purpose. Shea butter speaks to body coating and the failure to acquire an African-ness through its application. Black soap cleans sensitive skin. The vinyl records feed the soul. The books disseminate information.

I'm Still I Love with You is composed of four fiberboard shelves that are adorned with various objects. Johnson once said,

I've always been interested in this idea of a privileged life, probably because it's something I hadn't seen much of.

He recalls a story by Lawrence Weiner in which one of the characters refers to a table as "something to put something on." Johnson had this concept in mind when he created his sculptures with shelves on which he places objects he uses. He is interested in how objects exist and what we call them.

SUGGESTED DIALOGUE

- Think about objects with which you might choose to create an assemblage work like this one. What would you choose? How would you arrange the objects? What things would be next to each other and why?
- What message does this work convey to you?

- How does the texture and color of the shelves and background affect the mood of this sculpture?
- If you created “something to put something on,” what would it look like?

VOCABULARY

Post-black art movement: a group of artists who were, in the words of curator Thelma Golden, “adamant about not being labeled 'black' artists, though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness.”

Venice Biennale: a major contemporary art exhibition that takes place once every two years (in odd years) in Venice, Italy. The Biennale is based at the Giardini, a park that houses 30 permanent national pavilions.



GLENN LIGON

(B. NEW YORK CITY, 1960; LIVES AND WORKS IN NEW YORK CITY)

MIRROR #7, 2006

ACRYLIC, COAL DUST, SILKSCREEN, GESSO, AND OIL STICK ON CANVAS, 84 X 60 IN (213.4 X 152.4 CM)

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Glenn Ligon's first artistic experience occurred in the after-school pottery classes he took as a child. In 1982, he earned a Bachelor of Arts degree from Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut. Three years later, Ligon participated in the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program in New York. His first solo show, *How It Feels to Be Colored Me*, which opened in Brooklyn in 1989, presented large text-based works that have come to define his style. He has been granted several accolades, including a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1991, which allowed him to concentrate on being an artist. He described this experience by saying,

I thought, I can either put the money in the bank...or use it to try to be an artist full time. I knew my only love was making art. I thought I might as well go for it.

He later received a 2006 Skowhegan Award for painting and the 2010 United States Artists Fellowship in Los Angeles.

ABOUT THE ART

Ligon's interest in painting was fostered by his admiration for the **Abstract Expressionists** such as Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, and Jackson Pollock. However, the Whitney program in which Ligon participated discouraged focusing on painting, so Ligon began to explore a variety of media and techniques. He now works in print, neon, photography, video, and painting. Ligon also has a deep interest in literature, which is manifested in his work; he

wants to make language into a physical thing, something that has a real weight and force to it.

Ligon believes art is about words – their meaning in everyday conversation, their use in literature and pop culture, and even their physical shapes, which provide him with endless inspiration. Often **appropriating** text from writers such as James Baldwin, Jean Genet, and Zora Neale Hurston, Ligon chooses quotes that are as culturally charged as they are historically relevant.

In *Mirror #7*, Ligon includes text from Baldwin's 1955 essay, "**Stranger in the Village.**" Although they are not readily apparent, the words "see my smile and I began" can be found across the top of the canvas on closer examination. The partial concealment of the text is better understood when considering the process by which Ligon creates his work. He embeds the text onto the canvas by pressing an oil stick through a stencil of letters. As the artist moves the stencil across the canvas, it accumulates more material from the oil stick, and words become blurred beyond recognition. Ligon also smears the text with coal dust, which further obscures Baldwin's harrowing tale and the racial divide it conveys. As the text smudges and conjoins, its original identity and source are lost. The compelling shapes and forms of *Mirror #7* create a dynamic dialogue between the black positive space created by the stenciling and the negative white space left open, perhaps calling into question the perceptions of race in general. This effect not only suggests the limits of the printed or reproduced word but also provokes a questioning of the constructs of language. In 2005, Ligon began a body of work that borrowed phrases from Sojourner Truth and Gloria Steinem and recreated them in neon. Through this and other techniques, Ligon has focused on issues of race, sexuality, identity, and the tension between written and spoken language.

SUGGESTED DIALOGUE

- Where can you see text in this work? What does it say? Is the text coming forward or fading?
- How would it change the perception of the painting if we could read more of the text?
- What would the work look like with a variety of colors instead of black and white?
- Do you think Ligon was perhaps attempting to erase some of Baldwin's experiences, with hope that such stories need not be written?

VOCABULARY

- **Appropriation:** the borrowing elements of an existing work--ideas, symbols, imagery-- in the creation of a new work by changing its context
- **Abstract Expressionism:** The movement in American painting, centered mainly in New York City, that flourished in the 1940s and 1950s. Many works were spontaneous, gestural compositions that emphasized the painting materials and stood as records of the painting process; others were contemplative, near monochromatic works, featuring large areas of color.
- *“Stranger in the Village”*: An essay recounting the isolation experienced by African American novelist [James Baldwin](#) (1924-87) in Leukerbad, Switzerland after World War II. Baldwin’s text describes his numerous encounters with racism while abroad, accentuating the divide between blacks and whites both in America and in Europe.



KERRY JAMES MARSHALL

(B. BIRMINGHAM, AL, 1955; LIVES AND WORKS IN CHICAGO, IL)

SOUVENIR: COMPOSITION IN THREE PARTS, 1998-2000

PLASTIC, GLASS, PAPER, WOOD, STEEL, AND FRAMED VIDEO STILL, 98 X 32 X 22 IN (248.9 X 81.3 X 55.9 CM)

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Kerry James Marshall was born in Birmingham, Alabama in 1955. His family moved to a housing project in the neighborhood of **Watts** in Los Angeles, California when he was a young boy. After looking at his kindergarten teacher's scrapbook of greeting cards, photographs, and magazine advertisements, Marshall decided that he too wanted to create such images and that he would become an artist. He received a Bachelor of Fine Arts in 1978 from the Otis College of Art and Design. Since 1993, he has been a professor at the School of Art and Design at the University of Illinois. Marshall has been the recipient of several fellowships and grants, including a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in 1991, an Illinois Arts Council Fellowship in 1992, and a MacArthur Foundation "Genius" grant in 1997.

Describing his youth, Marshall has said,

*You can't be born in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1955 and grow up in South Central [Los Angeles] near the **Black Panthers** headquarters, and not feel like you've got some kind of social responsibility. You can't move to **Watts** in 1963 and not speak about it. That determined a lot of where my work was going to go.*

He began his professional career in the 1980s, a time when painting, his usual medium,

was often belittled as retrograde. Marshall's work, heavily symbolic and rich in metaphor, does not oppose tradition because he feels that contemporary artists are beneficiaries of all stylistic and conceptual developments rather than adversaries to them. He believes that contemporary artists are meant to synthesize past achievements into something new—a prospect that is made possible by the opportunities, such as technology, that contemporary society has to offer.

ABOUT THE ART

Marshall's work draws inspiration from African American popular culture as well as his upbringing. Both influenced the choice of subject matter in *Souvenir: Composition in Three Parts*. This work recalls the tragic bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama on Sunday, September 15, 1963, the same year that Marshall and his family left that city. The explosion at the African American church, which killed four young girls, marked a turning point in the United States 1960s Civil Rights Movement and contributed to an increase in support for passage of the **Civil Rights Act of 1964**.

The narrative in *Souvenir: Composition in Three Parts* is not immediately apparent. The black-and-white Baptist church sign is topped with a vibrant spray of flowers. A framed video still of the interior of the church and a card on a blue-fringed shelf are also part of the installation. All three elements hint at the event. Flowers are a token of grief and remembrance, the framed image depicts the actual site of the event, and the card is similar to one distributed at funerals, reminding viewers of the deaths that occurred.

SUGGESTED DIALOGUE

- Why do you think Marshall chose to represent the historic tragedy through objects instead of paint? What would a painting of this event look like?
- If you didn't know about the shocking incident connected with this work, how would you interpret it?
- The objects are life-sized and placed at eye level. Do these factors help to tell the story of what happened at the 16th Street Baptist Church? Why or why not?
- Marshall is driven to create work that provokes curiosity. He believes that artists have to earn the audience's attention every time they make something. Did he succeed with this work?

VOCABULARY

Watts: a mostly residential neighborhood in [South Los Angeles, California](#). During [World War II](#), the city built several large housing projects that by the early 1960s were populated mostly by poor African American families. Longstanding resentment by Los Angeles's working-class black community over discriminatory treatment by police and inadequate public services exploded on August 11, 1965, into what were commonly known as the [Watts Riots](#).

Black Panthers: an [African American revolutionary](#) organization active in the [United States](#) from the mid-1960s into the 1970s. Founded in [Oakland, California](#) in 1966, the organization initially set forth a doctrine calling primarily for the protection of [African American neighborhoods](#) from [police brutality](#).

Civil Rights Act of 1964 (enacted July 2, 1964): a landmark piece of legislation in the [United States](#) that outlawed major forms of discrimination against blacks and women. It ended unequal application of voter registration requirements and [racial segregation](#) in schools, at the workplace, and by facilities that served the general public.



LORNA SIMPSON

(B. BROOKLYN, NY, 1950; LIVES AND WORKS IN BROOKLYN, NY)

WIGS (PORTFOLIO) 1994

WATERLESS LITHOGRAPH AND FELT, 38 PANELS, 72 X 162 ½ IN OVERALL (182.9 X 412.8 CM)

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Lorna Simpson creates **conceptual photographs** and video art that explore issues related to identity, history, gender, and race. She frequently uses images of African American women to consider these ideas and to address stereotypes associated with African American culture. In her photographic work, Simpson often incorporates words as a way to question cultural assumptions that surround her imagery. She encourages, encouraging viewers to consider the open-ended meanings that result when fragments of text are paired with images. Within the last ten years, Simpson has also turned to video as a medium for examining notions of race and gender.

Simpson received her BFA in photography from the School of Visual Arts in New York in 1983 and an MFA in visual arts from the University of California, San Diego in 1985. She rose to prominence in the 1980s with her large-scale photographs that combine image and text. In many of these images, the faces of female subjects are deliberately obscured. In the 1990s Simpson began printing on materials other than the standard glossy paper such as felt and silk screen. She was the first African American woman to exhibit at the **Venice Biennale**. Simpson has been awarded several honors, including the Hugo Boss Prize from the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation in 1998, the Whitney Museum of American Art Award in 2001, and the Infinity Award in Art from the International Center of Photography in 2010. Her work is in major collections, including the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Wadsworth Athenaeum in Hartford, and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis as well as the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

ABOUT THE ART

Much of Lorna Simpson's work confronts the issues of identity, race, and gender in history and contemporary society. In *Wigs* Simpson has combined photography and text to explore the experience of African American women and the ways in which they conform to or rebel against prevailing trends by adopting various hairstyles. The work is composed of 21 duotone lithograph images of various wigs and hairpieces along with text. The pieces of felt on which the work is printed give it a tactile quality. The samples are presented in the same manner as scientific specimens – some of the wigs are braided, some curled, some are long, and some are short –but there is no apparent method of ordering. In part, *Wigs* refers to the ways in which African American women are classified, identified, and judged according to the prevalent white standard of beauty. As Simpson once stated,

I try to get the viewers to realize...that it is all a matter of surfaces and facades.

Interspersed between the wigs are lines of text collected from women, entertainers, and transvestites that comment on the use of wigs and the importance of hair in constructing gender and racial identities. *Wigs* contains no visible faces or bodies, so hair is the only characteristic from which identity can be determined. The somewhat ambiguous words and phrases scattered among the images are intended to guide the viewer's interpretation of the work. Simpson intentionally leaves her work open-ended with the rationalization that

there's not a resolution that just solves everything...the work is not answer-oriented.

SUGGESTED DIALOGUE

- Can you imagine what types of individuals might wear the wigs shown in this work?
- Even though faces and bodies are not seen, do you find yourself attributing various personality traits to each wig?
- What is the relationship between what is shown and what is not seen?
- How is hair similar or different from other signifiers, such as clothing or accessories? Consider a piece that had only shirts or shoes—would hair be the most powerful choice?

Vocabulary

Conceptual photography: Photographers and artists create photographs primarily from or about a concept or an idea. This genre is a subset of conceptual art.

Venice Biennale: a major contemporary art exhibition that takes place once every two years (in odd years) in Venice, Italy. The Biennale is based at a park, the Giardini, that houses 30 permanent national pavilions.



SHINIQUE SMITH

(B. BALTIMORE, MD, 1971; LIVES AND WORKS IN BROOKLYN, NY)

CRONE-HUNTRESS, 2007

WOOL, FABRIC, AND MIXED MEDIA, 76 X 100 X 70 IN (190.5 X 254 X 177.8 CM)

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Shinique Smith was brought up by her grandmother while her mother studied fashion in New York and Paris. Smith attended high school in Baltimore and received a scholarship to the Maryland Institute College of Art where she focused on the complicated relationship between the predominantly white “high” culture of the art world, and the black “street” culture of Baltimore. She earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts in 1992, and a Master of Arts in Teaching from Tufts University and the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in 2000. Smith returned to MICA to earn a Master of Fine Arts degree in 2003. She exhibits her work, which includes painting, sculpture, collage, and video, in a variety of ways including public installation and mural projects. Smith has also presented fashion collections in runway shows and curated museum exhibitions.

ABOUT THE ART

Smith finds inspiration from a diverse range of sources including Japanese calligraphy, Abstract Expressionism, the poetry of Nikki Giovanni and her work as a graffiti artist some 20 years ago. *Crone Huntress* is important as a transitional work during a time in which she was exploring how ideas and objects could combine into

a single hybrid of mess.

Smith works organically without a specific plan, allowing the objects to evolve and shape the creative process, in this case becoming what the artist describes as

a wise warrior; an African/ Celtic deity.

Crone Huntress reflects Smith's interest in fashion, period gowns, nomadic cultures, her grandmother's kitchen, and *The Lord of the Rings*. Arranged on an oriental rug, the objects that make up the sculpture came from Smith's family, friends, her own home and closet, and occasionally, the street. This method of making something new from something old gives her a feeling of discovery. Smith finds relationships among these items and is interested in the ways in which we are connected by the things we consume and discard. Moved by a newspaper article that described the bales of cast-off clothing shipped transatlantically to impoverished people, she also comments on how excess and waste have significance for both personal life and consumer culture.

SUGGESTED DIALOGUE

- What objects do you hold most dear and what do they say about you?
- How do our belongings and the “things” we own shape our experiences?
- Do you think our answers, as Americans, would differ from those of people in other countries?
- Does the title of the work affect your perception? If you could rename the work, what would you call it?
- Which components attract your eye first and why?



HANK WILLIS THOMAS

(B. PLAINFIELD, NJ, 1976; LIVES AND WORKS IN NEW YORK, NY AND SAN FRANCISCO, CA)

BASKETBALL AND CHAIN, 2003

DIGITAL C-PRINT, 99 X 55 IN. (251.5 X 139.7 CM)

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Hank Willis Thomas is a **conceptual photographer** working primarily with themes of identity, history, and popular culture. He was raised in an environment of art and cultural criticism by his mother Deborah Willis, a photographer and historian. Thomas received his Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in Photography and African Studies from New York University's Tisch School of Arts in 1998. In 2004, he earned a Master of Fine Arts degree in photography and another in visual criticism from the California College of the Arts in San Francisco.

In 2000, his cousin, Songha Willis Thomas, was murdered outside of a club by a group of men who were trying to steal his companion's gold chain. This random act of violence informs much of Thomas' work as does his continuing effort to understand our country's complicated view of black male identity.

I think that the irony of the ideal of the black male body is interesting.... It is fetishized and adored in advertising but in reality black men are in many ways the most feared and hated bodies of the 21st century.

Thomas's work has been displayed in several one-artist and group exhibitions in the United States as well as in Europe and South Africa.

ABOUT THE ART

Thomas often works with the existing language of advertising. He explained this process:

What's great about doing something that uses the medium of advertising is that so many people have access to being able to decode it. We are media literate.... My intention is always trying to make it kind of double sided so it doesn't have one concise meaning... also adding a bit more to suggest something beyond the obvious.

Thomas believes that the success of advertising is a result of its ability to reinforce generalizations about race, gender, and ethnicity that are a reflection of the way a culture views itself. His *B@anded* series incorporates popular advertising from Absolut Vodka, Master Card, Michael Jordan for Nike, and the NBA. Thomas utilizes recognizable logos and gives them a new meaning in reference to black society in both the present day and in our nation's past.

Thomas removes identifying traits to distill images that promote his own themes. *Basketball and Chain* depicts a basketball that is tethered to a black man's leg with a thick rusted chain. The only parts of the man that are seen are his lower right leg and left ankle and foot. He wears a pair of new red and white Nike sneakers, which immediately capture the eye as they pop against the black background. This cropping allows the focal point of the composition to be the feet, which are clearly marked or branded with the Nike swoosh. Other signifiers are absent, and the sole marker of identity has become the brand itself. A lot of Thomas's works references Nike's marketing of Michael Jordan. In his words,

I was thinking about how in the 1990s and the late 1980s in a lot of major cities, young African-American men were getting killed over Michael Jordan sneakers.... By wearing Michael Jordan shoes, you can in some way become associated with him, there is seen to be a kind of transference.

The shoes had an immediate star quality promised with their wearing. The weight of their meaning for the consumer, equal parts cool and dangerous, is emphasized by the weight of the chain. For the athlete, *Basketball and Chain* furthermore relates the dilemma of sponsorship, which simultaneously raises their status and weighs them down; chaining oneself to only this notion of success limits potential. Additionally, the shackle references slavery.

A SUGGESTED DIALOGUE

- The image maintains a great level of anonymity. Analyze this aspect in conjunction with Thomas's views on the reinforcement of generalizations in advertising.
- Thomas radically crops his photographs. How does this technique affect the viewer's interpretation of the piece?
- Thomas has said that these works are meant to start conversations and evoke several meanings and interpretations. Discuss your first impressions.

VOCABULARY

- **Conceptual photography:** As a part of Conceptual Art, photographers and artists create images primarily from or about a concept or an idea.



KEHINDE WILEY

(B. LOS ANGELES, CA, 1977; LIVES AND WORKS IN BROOKLYN, NY)

EQUESTRIAN PORTRAIT OF THE DUKE OLIVARES 2005

OIL ON CANVAS, 108 X 108 IN (274.3 X 274.3 CM)

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Kehinde Wiley began taking art classes at the age of 11, and broadened his education through museum visits. He earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the San Francisco Art Institute in 1999, which was followed by a Master of Fine Arts degree from the Yale University School of Art in 2001. Shortly after graduation, Wiley became an Artist-in-Residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem.

Wiley's work is layered with references to the history of art, politics, religion, sexuality, and it explores the rich potential of paint and scale. He integrates traditional European portraiture with contemporary hip-hop culture by rendering his subjects—typically, black men from his neighborhood, people he meets while traveling, or music celebrities—in conventional poses for elite subjects and against decorative backgrounds inspired by Celtic manuscript illumination, Islamic metalwork, and Baroque and Rococo architecture. Wiley has travelled to Brazil, Nigeria, and New Delhi, among other locations, to broaden his process of “casting from the streets.” His latest investigation of the genre of portraiture is an examination of mug shots as portraits. Wiley is the 2002 recipient of the Rema Hort Mann Foundation grant, and he received the Americans for the Arts Young Artist Award for Artistic Excellence in 2008.

ABOUT THE ART

Equestrian Portrait of the Duke Olivares was originally shown in a 2005 gallery exhibition entitled *Rumors of War*, for which Wiley created four portraits that were based on notable European precedents. In each instance the sitter was selected by Wiley and brought to the artist's studio to browse through art books in order to find a painting in which he was interested. Wiley used the chosen painting as a starting point, inserting the model into the setting, with alterations as minimal as changing the color of a shirt or as great as modifying the entire background.

The prototype for Wiley's *Equestrian Portrait of Duke Olivares* is *Equestrian Portrait of Count-Duke Olivares* of 1634 by **Diego Velázquez**. The scenes by Velázquez and Wiley both depict a male figure astride the rearing horse and holding a staff in his right hand. A sword rests on his left hip with a piece of cloth trailing behind it. The horse is adorned with gold reins and decorative straps. Wiley replaced Don Gaspar de Guzmán, the Count-Duke of Olivares and Prime Minister of Spain, with an unnamed, youthful black male in contemporary street clothes. He intentionally leaves off formal titles or uniforms, creating a marked contrast between the elite Duke and the unknown, yet no less compelling, contemporary New Yorker. Wiley replaced Velázquez's landscape background with a bold tapestry-like pattern (there is a bit of landscape that imitates the original picture under the horse's front hooves). The animation of the decorative background design contrasts with the solid three-dimensional modeling of the figure and horse. Wiley's painting departs from the 17th-century convention of portraiture that was reserved for the elite, presenting a culturally relevant painting which simultaneously references the past and present.

SUGGESTED DIALOGUE

- If you were one of Wiley's models, what type of traditional painting would you choose as a setting for your portrait?
- Consider the artist's combination of elite European and urban black American attributes. Do they blend into a composition that appears believable? Why or why not?
- Note the curling botanical elements that extend from the background over the horse's tail. How does that component affect the composition?
- Wiley is often said to be influenced by Barkley Hendricks. How does their work compare?

VOCABULARY

Diego Velázquez (1599-1660): a Spanish painter who was the leading artist in the [court](#) of King [Philip IV](#). In addition to numerous renditions of scenes of historical and cultural significance, he painted scores of portraits of the Spanish royal family, other notable European figures, and commoners.